

Newsweek

TECH & SCIENCE

EMPTY BEACHES FROM COVID-19 LOCKDOWN LEAD TO HUGE SPIKE IN SEA TURTLE NESTS IN FLORIDA AND THAILAND

BY ROSIE MCCALL
April 20 2020

Authorities in Florida and Thailand have reported a higher-than-usual number of sea turtle nests during the COVID-19 lockdown, which some experts have attributed to the absence of beachgoers.

In Florida, at least 76 leatherback sea turtle nests have been found on Juno Beach since the end of February, the Loggerhead Marine Life Center said in a statement.

According to the nonprofit, which focuses on sea turtle and ocean conservation, the absence of beachgoers offers turtles the chance to hatch without disturbance, while a lack of activity in the water enables adult turtles to mate closer to the shoreline.

It remains early in the season, with the majority of nesting taking place between May 1 and October 31, according to Sea Turtle Conservancy.



“Florida is the only state in the continental U.S. where leatherbacks regularly nest. It is possible that the increase in nesting is part of a natural cycle. Sea turtles don’t nest in the same density or amount every year, it is more cyclical, and depends on the species,” Jacki Lopez, the director for the Center of Biological Diversity’s Florida program, told Newsweek.

“The complete picture remains to be seen, but it does appear that this year’s nest season is seeing more activity.

“If the COVID-19 lockdown is a contributing factor, it would be due to the lack of tourists and beachgoers crowding the beach or otherwise illuminating it at night.”

She added: “It will be interesting to see how Gov. [Ron] DeSantis’ recent lifting of beach restrictions in some areas might reverse the trend,” referring to the Florida governor’s decision to reopen the state’s beaches, announced Friday.

In Thailand, Kongkiat Kittiwatanawong, director of the Phuket Marine Biological Center, told Reuters the authorities have recorded 11 nests since November, which is the highest it has been in the last two decades. It stands in stark contrast to the previous five years when no such nests were found.

The change in circumstances is a very good sign, Kittiwatanawong told Reuters. He explained how many of the areas turtles typically use to lay eggs have been destroyed by human activity. “If we compare to the year before, we didn’t have this many spawn, because turtles have a high risk of getting killed by fishing gear and humans disturbing the beach,” he said.

The region’s typically busy beaches has lacked tourists and human activity due to social distancing measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thailand has been on lockdown since late March, when the Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha closed the country’s borders to foreign visitors and banned social gatherings. According to Bloomberg, domestic travel has also been restricted, while shops deemed non-essential are to remain shut until the end of April, with the possibility of extension.

On April 3, the government toughened restrictions by instating a national curfew prohibiting residents leaving their home between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m., The Bangkok Post reported. As the spread of the disease appears to slow-down, some provinces have announced the loosening of restrictions, while Bloomberg reports the government may begin easing the lockdown early next month.

According to Johns Hopkins University dashboard, Thailand has reported 2,792 cases and 47 deaths from COVID-19 at time of writing.

According to the Sea Turtle Conservancy, the average leatherback turtle is between 4 and 6 feet long and weighs between 660 and 1,100 pounds. However, the largest recorded was close to 10 feet and tipped the scales at more than 2,000 pounds, which is more than 10 times that of the average American man.

The species gets its name from its unusually leather-like shell, which is made of a layer of thin but tough skin reinforced with tiny bone plates. According to the National Geographic, its evolutionary roots can be traced back more than 100 million years and it is the one remaining member of its family.

In recent decades, the species has faced a number of threats to its existence due to human activity, from urban development projects and nest disturbance to plastic pollution and climate change.

The leatherback turtle is listed as vulnerable on the IUCN red list. However, many sub-populations, including the Eastern Pacific leatherback turtles, are considered critically endangered. According to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the species faces extinction with numbers declining right across its range.